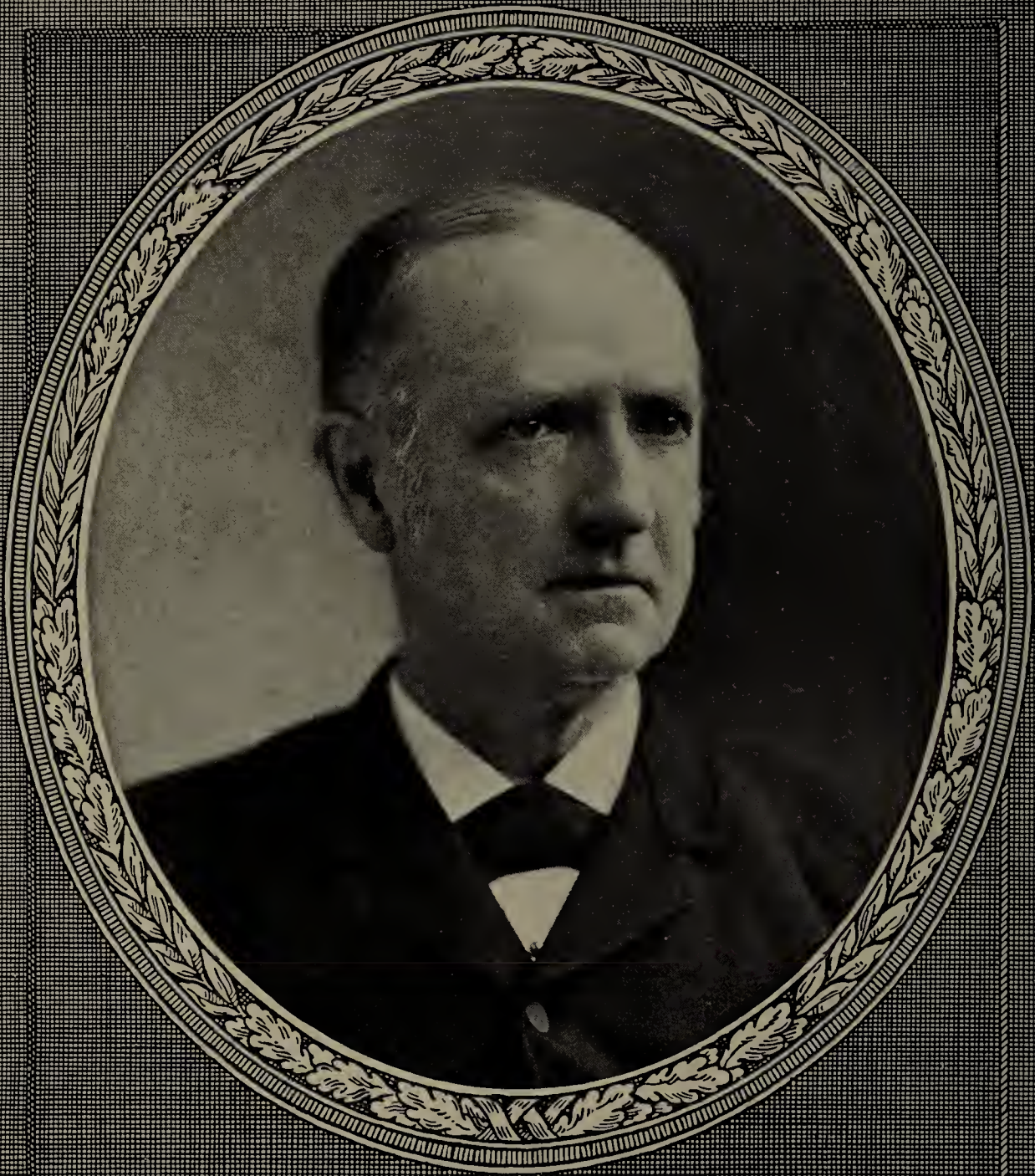


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THEOPHILUS PARVIN

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BY GEORGE CLARK MOSHER, M.A., M.D., F.A.C.S., KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI

THEOPHILUS PARVIN, probably the most classical, philosophical contributor to the literature of obstetrics and gynecology America has ever known, was born in March, 1829, at Buenos Aires, Argentina, where his father, the Rev. Theophilus Parvin, was stationed as a missionary. His mother was the daughter of Cæsar Augustus Rodney, attorney general of the United States under President Jefferson. She died when he was two weeks old and his father brought the child back to this country. The father died, however, when young Theophilus was 7.

Parvin entered LaFayette College at 12, and finished his academy career in the University of Indiana in 1847. He studied Greek and Hebrew at Princeton, received his master's degree in 1850 at the age of 21, and the degree of doctor of medicine from the University of Pennsylvania in 1852. For 2 years he shipped as surgeon on a line of packets between Philadelphia and Liverpool. He filled successively the chairs of materia medica at Ohio Medical College 1854 to 1864: of obstetrics and diseases of women in the University of Louisville where he remained until 1869; of obstetrics and diseases of women at Jefferson Medical College, Philadelphia, from 1883 until his death in 1898. Dr. Parvin showed his versatility in accepting the post of house surgeon of Wills Eye and Ear Hospital in Philadelphia, immediately upon his graduation.

His writings attracted attention, and he was besieged with offers of editorship of medical journals. In conjunction with Roberts Bartholow, who was with him on the faculty of Ohio Medical College at Cincinnati, Parvin edited the *Cincinnati Journal of Medicine* which is now in charge of Dr. Charles L. Bonifield. In 1866-7 and in 1868-9 he edited the *Western Journal of Medicine*; with David Yandell, of the University of Louisville, he was co-editor of the *American Practitioner* 1869-1883.

In going through the bibliography of the latter third of the 19th century, one is struck with the myriad of his contributions and the great variety of subjects upon which Parvin wrote, always with a style most entertaining and illuminating. His textbook, *The Science and Art of Obstetrics*, which ran rapidly through several editions, was marked by its accuracy and erudition and as well by the abundance of classical and modern references with which it abounded.

He translated von Winckel's *Diseases of Women*, from the German; was a contributor to Ashhurst's *Encyclopædia of Surgery*; Sajous' *Universal Medical Sciences*; the *American Textbook of Obstetrics* and the *American Textbook of Therapeutics*.

He was successively elected president of the State Medical Society of Indiana, the American Medical Association, and the American Academy of Medicine; he was one of the founders and an early president of the American Medical Editors Association and he was a founder and president of the American Gynecological Society, the Philadelphia Obstetrical Society, and various other medical organizations.

In 1892 he presided at the International Congress of Obstetrics in Brussels. In 1890, I first met him while he was chairman of the obstetrical section of the tenth International Medical Congress at Berlin, where he was associated with Koch, Esmarch, Playfair and Pasteur, on a most notable series of programs. A long list of honorary fellowships in foreign societies is attached to his name. The preserved contributions to the then current medical literature comprises over one hundred and fifty titles, but these do not include all his writings. He must be classed as one of the great men who have illumined the medical profession with their intellectual attainments. His vigorous well chosen English was a delight. His classical allusions were always apt. In fact he was the embodiment of the erudition which pervaded all his writings through the thirty years (1868-1898) of his active professional and teaching career.

Dr. William H. Parrish who wrote his obituary for the American Medical Association said: "Theophilus Parvin's career as the master obstetrician of America is familiar to the medical profession. During the last quarter of the 19th century he ranked undoubtedly among the greatest living authorities in medicine."

His textbook on obstetrics was received enthusiastically by students and physicians alike, and occupied the relative position in obstetrics that Samuel D. Gross' monumental work did in surgery; that Sir Thomas Watson and Trousseau did in medicine, and Roberts Bartholow's *Materia Medica* did in therapeutics.

In 1889, Dr. Parvin established the first obstetrical clinic in America; following the method of von Winckel in Munich, 34 cases were delivered without a maternal death. In making a report of this enterprise before the New York Academy of Medicine, Parvin appealed to that organization to set the light to guide the profession, making clinical obstetrics a part of the curriculum of the medical school of the country. He urged that every college which refused to take this step should be criticized by common condign condemnation.

Three philosophical essays of Parvin have come down to us, in which a third of a century ago he analyzed problems which are today of peculiar interest.

These were on "The Genius of Medicine," "The Woman and her Physician," and "The Casuistry of Medicine." The first was based on Conte's definition of a science as "Knowledge which enables us to foresee and foretell events." He said in substance: "Let any case of common disease be examined by half a dozen educated physicians, and there would be in almost every instance an exact agreement as to the nature of malady, its progress, and the means advisable to eliminate it, or to shorten its course. The natural history of disease is so like an open book to the trained physician that he can in the majority of cases foresee and foretell it."

Parvin said that the student must not forget that the foundations of our science were laid by Hippocrates, the noble Greek, and that it came not from the temple nor the gymnasium but from the laboratory of the physician.

In his oration on "Woman," Parvin says: "Beauty is the common physical characteristic of woman; age, disease, poverty, suffering, ignorance, the play of evil passions may mar or destroy the beauty, not in a single individual only, but in those deriving their origin from her. Nevertheless this gracious gift is the general possession of the sex."

To show the remarkable impression Dr. Parvin made on his auditors, by the flight of his poetic tribute to the power of the beauty in woman, I will quote the following incident. I was astonished while speaking of his life before the Louisville Obstetrical Society, in February, 1927, to hear Dr. William B. Doherty, now 85 years of age, who was on the Faculty as an instructor when Parvin taught in the University of Louisville, repeat from memory the quotation from the twenty-fourth ode of Anacreon, the Greek poet, wherein he spoke of the gifts of nature to all that breathe the air of heaven some boon; wreathed horns to the bull; the hoof of strength to the steed, speed to the timid hare. Then this apostrophe to woman.

"To man she gave in that proud hour
The boon of intellectual power.
Then what O woman! what for thee
Was left in Nature's Treasury?
She gave thee beauty—mightier far
Than all the pomp and power of war.
Nor steel nor fire itself hath power,
Like woman in her conquering hour
So be but fair, mankind adores thee,
Smile, and a world is weak before thee!"

The motive of Parvin in this address on woman was to emphasize the peculiar type of relation between the sexes and the delicacy needed in the practice of gynecology and obstetrics as contrasted with other departments of medicine.

His greatest effort was in the essay "The Casuistry of Medicine" in which he showed the problem which dominated all philosophy, all science, and its applica-

tion to art not only in the ordinary relations of life but to us specifically through the evolution in medicine from that of Æsculapius and Hippocrates down to our own myriad of specialties—the problem of right and wrong in a debatable decision. Of course, Parvin used the definition of casuistry as in its original application by the Jesuits in solving the questions of conscience; the interpretation of ethical principles to questions of conscience and judgment. He discussed many questions which today are still matters of controversy, birth control, the induction of abortion where he quotes: “Lex, lex dura sed lex”; the right of the mother against the child if either is to be sacrificed; the question of which phase of prevarication constitutes lying in medicine which President Fairchild of Oberlin College decided in his day and Joseph Collins in ours has elucidated. Many other points will appeal to every surgeon interested in medical history because, as Parvin said, casuistry is just as much to be applied to reasoning, judgment, and philosophy today as it was in the beginning of history.

Dr. Parvin is survived by a son Dr. Noble Parvin and a daughter Mrs. James P. Baker, both living in Indianapolis. To them as well as to the successors in the chairs he graced in the various medical schools, I am indebted for much of the personal data of this tribute to one of my ideals—Theophilus Parvin.

